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Intro: Welcome to the Young Farmers Food Safety Focus Group Series. I'm Maggie Kaiser, the Produce Safety Training Coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition. Throughout the summer of 2020, I, along with Bre Sliker, Billy Mitchell, and farmer facilitators from across the country, hosted a series of focus groups with farmers, where we discussed the challenges and successes of implementing various on-farm produce safety practices. And we recorded them. Because we want these conversations to be a resource for you, in every session we bring together farmers with similar experiences for a discussion about a specific farm food safety topic. We begin each one with a farmer presentation followed by a roundtable discussion where farmers share problems and solutions with one another. We hope you enjoy them and find some practical information for your farm.

[Music]

[01:08]

Maggie: My name is Maggie Kaiser. I'm on the Business Services team at the National Young Farmers Coalition and I work as our Produce Safety Training Coordinator. I'm also a farmer in New Orleans, a nursery grower, and have spent this past season working for Annie and Cheryl on their farm. I'm gonna have Billy and Bre introduce themselves, and then I'll take you all through the rundown of the focus group order of events, and then ask you all to introduce yourselves.

Billy: Hey all, my name is Billy Mitchell. I work for the National Farmers Union doing food safety, outreach and education. Before this I farmed on and off again for about a decade on small-scale vegetable farms. And I live on the coast of Georgia.

Annie: I'm Annie, this is Cheryl. We farm in New Orleans. We have two separate locations, which we'll talk more about in our presentation. But we just started doing a CSA, an untraditional CSA farm-share, through using Harvie, which some of you may have heard of, and then we just started doing that in February. We were just getting it off the ground when Covid hit so we had to make some adjustments, we were still kind of figuring things out. Prior to that we were doing farmers markets and restaurant sales.

Cheryl: And we're basically at the end of our first farm-share season.

Frankie: My name is Frankie and I grow mostly vegetables at a farm here in Wimberley, TX, which is about 45 minutes southwest of Austin. We're selling to restaurants, [they were] our biggest customer and then also I am a part of a co-op out of San Marcus, the next town over, where we run a multi-farm CSA. I don't even want to call it a farm-share. The farm inherited an old email list and we just put together a weekly newsletter and say, "Here's what we have. Here's how much it costs. Order at least \$25 of stuff and we'll put a bag for you together," and that's kind of what's carried us through.

[03:49]

Shakera: Hello everyone, I'm Shakera and we're actually in South Texas. Very hot. We're here in Edinburg, if you know the area, by South Padre Island, Brownsville. We do mostly vegetables, we do a few herbs, and flowers, but we're mostly a vegetable farm and this past year we were doing mostly wholesale and then we had to switch to the CSA model where people would order it, then you would put together a box, but it wouldn't be by subscription, just a weekly basis. In the past couple of years, we did do a 50 members CSA that was part of a hospital employee benefits program. Or that's how we ran our CSA for awhile, and we also did farmers markets and some restaurant sales too.

Jacob: Hey everybody, nice to talk to folks outside of Vermont. I feel like it's been a long time since I've been able to do that. My name is Jacob. I [am the Farm Production Manager] for the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps in Richmond, Vermont, which is northwest Vermont, and I don't think it's hot compared to you all, but it's 90 today and that feels like we're melting. We are a diversified vegetable farm and we do some poultry as well. We mostly work with youth and young adults and hire on young people to teach them about farming and grow a bunch of food for food insecure folks in our community. Our biggest outlet is a CSA, we call it a Health Care Share, which we send out to patients at local hospitals who are identified as being food insecure and having a diet related illness, and they get a free CSA for 12 to 20 weeks throughout the year. We're doing about 400 shares this year, and we've heard some concern from the Medical Center partners about how we're going to do our pickup and how we're going to grow and package our food. We're just having to sort of rethink how we distribute our food and how we package it, so I'm curious to hear what everybody else has come up with.

[05:53]

Maggie: Thanks everyone, I'm really glad you all are here. We're gonna pass it now to Annie and Cheryl to have them go a little bit more in depth about what's been happening at River Queen Greens.

Annie: River Queen Greens, we're in New Orleans and as Cheryl said, we are wrapping up our season. The beginning of February is when we started doing the farm-share and before that we've been selling at farmers markets. Our season is basically September until June here, so this is the end of our growing season. We take a break in the summer. Before Covid, this is some information about what we're about. It's an urban farm. We have two 2 separate sites. One of them is in the Bywater neighborhood on the left. That's a half-acre or so in a residential neighborhood in the city. And then we have a larger property across the river on the West Bank. We started growing in the Bywater in November 2017 and this season was our first, and we're now on about an acre of growing space out there. Combined we're about an acre and a half. Mostly we're doing farmers market. We were doing 2 [farmers markets] a week and then in February we cut 1 market to do farm-share one time a week and do a market one day a week. When we started out, we were targeting having about 45 members in our farm-share. We were using Harvie. Do people here know Harvie? I'm seeing some shaking of heads.

[07:39]

Cheryl: Harvie is basically a platform that allows our members to have a totally free choice share without us having to do the work of creating those shares. We just input everything that's ready to harvest on the farm, and Harvie has this magical algorithm, and then tells us how many shares, based on our pricing, we could sell that week based on our harvest, and each share looks different based on each member's preferences. It's pretty cool and we decided to go with them because of the convenience for our customers and also for us. But I will say that Harvie does take what ends up being about a 10% cut from the share cost. We bill some of that into the price of the share, but we also split some of it with the customer so, it is a cost, one that I think is worth it. We might not have used Harvie, but I'm glad we use it overall.

Annie: It certainly allowed us to transition very quickly from doing the farmers markets to doing 100% online. All we had to do was add more members. What we were doing originally was we would drop off bins at a few different locations and we just tell people they could come pick up the food from inside those bins. Any time between 9 and 12 or whatever timeframe, and they would go to the site, they would find their name on the bin, they would open it up, empty the contents and then stack the bins and we would come back and get the bins at the end. Just a little bit about our food safety practices. At that point we were sort of doing the minimum given our kind of scrappy setup. So, we put in a hand washing station. We always spray out bins, we don't let things hang out and develop. We hadn't started sanitizing or soap washing anything yet and there's a lot of other food safety practices that could be improved on but all in good time. We had two of us working and one full time employee and then we've added Maggie who was helping do one day of harvesting a week with us and then we have like occasional garden volunteers helping out in the Bywater. Then Covid hit mid-March and we stopped doing the farmers market the week before the farmers market shut down. The things that we did to get our share up and running, from 45 to about 230

or so on average a week, was we started aggregating from a couple other farms in the area, including one in particular that had been 100% restaurant sales, so they lost their entire market basically, and we were able to get a ton of greens from them and they grow really beautiful organic stuff.

[10:48]

Cheryl: The first three or four weeks of Covid shares was pretty crazy. We were just buying everything from everyone, trying to bulk up the share because it seemed like everyone was scrambling to get food from local farmers and no one wanted to go to the grocery store. It was like we just couldn't meet the demand, but I'd say after about a month or two, we kind of got into a rhythm where we were working with just a couple of other growers, and that definitely helps simplify the process.

Annie: The other things that we needed in order to be able to expand so quickly was more labor. There are a lot of people who are out of work, so we found a lot of people who are willing to do work trades for a share. And there's a lot of bagging that needed to happen, way more than we were having to do before. We went up to three people doing work shares, just bagging twice a week and then people managing the shares because we changed from people getting their own share with the customers picking up shares to having someone get the bin out for them so there's only one person touching everything. So, the bins that we're using, I have a picture here, this is at our Bywater farm where one of our pickup locations is. They're 10 gallon Rubbermaid bins that fit 95% of the shares. We have a couple larger shares, people will need a larger bin, we have a few overflow size bins for that. The things we had to buy and set up during the pandemic. We've been using this product called Steramin, in which is a sterilizer?

[12:49]

Cheryl: It's a common restaurant sanitizer for glasses and dishware.

Annie: And we got a few of these two gallon, Home Depot brand spray bottles that we put the sterilizer in. We put 4 tablets in and fill it up with water and then you can spray pretty much every surface that any food might touch. We don't have any buildings on our farm, so we don't have any indoor plumbing or outdoor plumbing other than a spigot so, we've set up these field hand washing stations on both of our sites which are made out of a 5 gallon Igloo container that we converted the faucet spigot to make it be something you can just turn on without having to press a button and hold it, so you turn it and put your hands under. You don't have to hold the button while you do it. There was a grocery store that went out of business about a month or something beforehand, and we bought a bunch of stuff from them, including a ton of hand towels. So, we've gone 100% to using the restaurant, hand towel dishrags so that we don't have to be using paper towels constantly.

Cheryl: Which were also hard to source in March.

Annie: We also stocked up on the sort of standard PPE disposable gloves. I'm sure you are all hopefully wearing your own face masks as well. We're using reusable ones, but I know people also use disposable ones. Like I said, we had to get a lot more bagging supplies because a lot of the things we had in market are more out. We were doing a microgreen sort of buffet style thing where people could serve themselves microgreens with tongs. That's obviously not happening now, and also we use reusable containers for our microgreens, so those we put in the dishwasher when people actually do care to return them to us. So, you can see sort of what our production line looks like. The picture on the top right is Cheryl packing fennel into the box.

[15:20]

Cheryl: Yeah, and just a note on gloves, we typically choose not to wear gloves unless we're doing a really repetitive task like bagging. We might wear gloves if we're standing there bagging for an hour or so, but for harvesting and washing and packing the share, we just do constant hand washing and sanitizing.

Annie: Here we go, here's our exciting sanitizing.. It took about an hour or so for two people to sanitize about 100 bins. And the process that - we now have is a work-trade doing it, which is glorious. We dunk the lids in this bleach bin in the front and then we line up all of the bins. We spray them with the sanitizer in the inside and then we stack them in sections, just upside down on the racks behind Cheryl over here.

Cheryl: We don't have a picture of our racks, but from that grocery store we got metal shelving. We just use the actual shelves for that, on top of cinder blocks, to be our drying racks, because actually the clips that hold the shelves in place didn't come with it, so the shelving is useless. But the shelves themselves are really great drying racks and we have like 20 of them, so that's what we ended up using for all of our bin drying surfaces, they end up being a foot off the ground.

Annie: Then we spray the outside of that. We were originally spraying the outside with bleach and the inside with the Steramin, thinking that the bleach was a cheaper thing and it wasn't food contact so it was fine.

Cheryl: The Steramin has to sit for one minute and then it air dries, so that's very easy. We just spray it and forget it.

[17:40]

Annie: Here is our setup at three different sites. This is at our farm, where we just bring out the bin, then take off the lid and the customer just empties the food directly into their bags. They don't have to touch any other surface. That was what we're trying to avoid – people touching surfaces.

Cheryl: There's a little dance that we do: they stand back, we put the bin down and step back, they step forward so we're not crowding around the table at the same time.

Annie: Here's my little analysis of what's working and what could be improved. We really like the bin method. It's something that we were doing before Covid, because we don't want to have to be buying tons of boxes.

Cheryl: We just don't have storage space for things like wax boxes, or the labor for putting them together. We just decided that the the upfront cost of the bins, and long term durability of them would be better for our setup. It just kind of worked out that we had committed to the bin system before Covid and it did make it easy to scale up in a pretty Covid-friendly way.

Annie: The sanitizing system seems to work pretty well, and once we could take that off of our plate, it worked even better. That's something that's pretty easy to have other people do, and we had too many other things.

[19:16]

Cheryl: It felt like such a burden to us at the end of the day, like the bins still needed to be sanitized. That's been a really great part of this adaptation during Covid – reaching out and finding people who are excited to plug in.

Annie: It basically made it possible for us to expand the way we did and just to keep going. The metal tables and racks work nicely with our system and are easily sanitized. Keeping people conscientious about regular hand washing, wearing masks. Things that we could do that would be more food safe would be soaping the bins – this is an ongoing discussion that feels very overwhelming to add that into the process so we haven't. Although we have purchased a 5 gallon bucket of soap which is sitting in our shelves in our shed now. This surface is wood that we put the bins down on, which is technically somewhat cleanable, and we do sweep it regularly, but we're not soaping it. We're working with what we got. And that's it, I'm going to stop screen sharing. Thank you for listening.

Maggie: Does it maybe make sense to open it for questions first? Does anyone have any questions for Annie and Cheryl?

Frankie: I was curious about the software that you were talking about. You said that it tells you how many shares you can make based on your customer preferences. Are you all just making uniform shares or you actually making customizable shares?

Annie: It's all customized. But we don't do the customizing, the system does. It just tells us what we need to harvest and then tells us what to put in each bin.

Frankie: So, you get your customers to go on this application and be like, "I don't like eggplant." And then from that point on they can just get the share without the eggplant?

[21:27]

Annie: People sign up for the share through Harvie. And when they sign up, they don't have to, but most people do put their preferences for everything that we say that we grow. So, we have about 125 items or something listed, which is not what we have available every time, but it might come up. And when it does it, they can rate it on a scale of one to five, with one being they don't ever want it and five being they've wanted it every time that we have it available. Then they get assigned to share. We have small and full shares, so we input the price of each thing and then Harvie will target so that it gets around that value. Then they can customize. They can swap things and they can also purchase extras.

Frankie: Is it a weekly interaction they have to make or they just do it at the beginning of the season and they get a box every week?

Annie: They could do it just once with setting the preferences and they would just get a box. But if they want to customize it week by week they can and, 60-70% [of customers] customize it. And that might be leaving what they have in the share and then buying eggs, which we have as an extra, or going through and switching things out. Harvie is the system created by Small Farm Central, which is a company that's been around for awhile. They had a previous iteration for a CSA website help, but this is way more of a full service program, it's great. I think they quadrupled their farms during Covid, because all of a sudden everyone wanted a CSA. It's nice because it has kind of a market experience because people are basically shopping when they go through and customize and add extras. We've also added other products like local food makers who didn't have an outlet. We've been selling some prepared foods and mushrooms and other stuff. That's not our products, but it allows us to help other people sell stuff during this time where people have lost their sales outlets.

[23:54]

Cheryl: One interesting thing that I was thinking about with Harvie, and also the bins and why that works well, is would it have been possible to do this without the bins? What would that look like for us? Because the bins are an inexpensive, upfront cost and the sanitizing is a lot of work so I'm just trying to think of alternatives. Harvie and the bins kind of go together, but it does kind of require us to pack on-site just because every share is so different. I think it would be kind of a nightmare trying to package everything and bring it to a place, and then unpackage and make individual shares based on our harvest list for each person at a third location. I think Harvie works with one central packing location that's near our cooler where everything is in its own container roughly and we have this assembly line.

Annie: It requires some space, it's a different system than a normal CSA, but I can't imagine having to bring all of those bins with all of the different products to a site or set up. And the other nice thing about the bins is they stack really well. We thought we could just pack everything on our site in bags or something. We wouldn't be able to stack them, so we'd be limited to the space in the flats by space in our truck.

[25:40]

Shakera: I really like the outdoor washing station. Could you tell me where do you find the little faucet, the handle?

Annie: Oh, I think Maggie has a whole instruction manual for how to set it up with the different options, so I'll defer to them.

Maggie: Not yet, but that is something I'm supposed to make. So Shakera, this is the perfect impetus to do it. But at the local hardware store, in the plumbing section, the metal spigot fixtures that you can screw it. And I can send you a picture of all the pieces that we use, yes?

Shakera: Please, yeah.

Frankie: At our farm and then out our co-op, the way that we were doing things, we had to make a hand wash station for our co-op's pick up and we just ran a garden hose and you can retrofit garden hoses and plumb them into sinks where they still have functioning handles and the whole thing. It is a little bit of plumbing and it definitely was three trips to the hardware store to get it right, but it's awesome. It's like a real sink and you can turn it off and on.

Jacob: On the hand washing station, the University of Vermont extension, also the agricultural engineer person there, put out a really great blog post on some DIY hand washing stations with pictures and specifications and all that jazz. If you just Google "UVM extension hand washing," you can find a nice plan for like \$150 or something. How often are you all doing your CSA pickups?

[27:28]

Annie: What we were doing was a Monday, Monday night and Tuesday morning. We would pack that on Monday afternoon and then we were doing Thursday night and Saturday morning, and we packed those on Thursday afternoon. We've switched a couple weeks ago to just do packing, breaking up the Monday Tuesday one, because those days were just so long, so we just did all of the distribution on Tuesday: Tuesday morning and Tuesday night. And then we're cutting out Tuesday now, and we're just going to do Thursday, Saturday. But we'll see how long that lasts, we're supposed to do it for another two weeks after this week.

Jacob: Something we've been thinking about that I want to get your thoughts on is, we've heard that if you got something, sit for more than three days, that counts as an antiviral step because Covid hasn't been shown to live more than three days on plastic or metal surfaces. So, what do you all think if you had a once a week pick up, or a Thursday and Monday only take up, or something instead of going through the hassle of sanitizing bins, trying to just like set things aside for 72 hours?

Cheryl: I feel like that three-day thing was maybe not communicated yet when we first started, because that would have been something we considered. I think I heard some people say it, but I was like, I don't know. This seems fishy. In some studies, it can live for three weeks on plastic and so we're just like, "We have got to sanitize everything." But's that's a great question. I would definitely be open to not sanitizing. If three days were sufficient, especially at three days out in the sun and open air.

Frankie: Are y'all just philosophically opposed to paper bags or plastic bags, because we just give the person the bag and don't worry about it. That's yours now. Or, you know, trying not to touch people or things, or shares at all.

[29:47]

Cheryl: Well, we started with the bins before Covid and that was both a cost and environmental choice that we wanted to be as reusable as possible. And then for packing, it's actually pretty hard to pack quickly into a bag and some stuff is wet, so some stuff has to go in plastic, some stuff has to go in paper. Because of the stacking, because we bring shares around the city, it has to stay in our cooler overnight, like the Saturday one, and stay there for two days. It's hard to figure out how bags would work because we don't have a big cooler with a big truck, so to maximize space and to maximize the efficiency during the packing process, for us, it made sense to do bins, but I also totally see the value [of bags]. Sometimes I would love to just

hand people something and they walk away with it and not have to worry about it. But we had kind of like started down this one path and figured it would be easier to keep going.

Shakera: Right now we are participating in a multi-farm type co-op CSA and we have reusable bags, but they're cloth on the outside and the inside is kind of like the insulate, the shiny material, so we can spray and wipe and clean the inside. But far as the outside. The cloth material, how would you suggest cleaning that down, because they get exchanged, they take them to their homes and then they get returned?

Annie: Can they be machine washed?

Shakera: I don't think so. I think they might break down.

Annie: Just hang it out on the clothesline or something and let sun sanitize for three days, yeah?

[31:47]

Billy: As far as the three day thing, there's definitely research around that. The only thing I would consider is that coronavirus is not the only risk that we're worried about. The norovirus, which is the number one foodborne illness will last up to two weeks, so sometimes the cleaning and sanitizing, it's just a good overall step for all the other icky things that are out there in the world, both ick-factor – you want your things to look nice – but then also bacteria, norovirus, the flu, and other things too.

Maggie: Yeah, that's a great point, Billy. I think that we've all been consumed by Covid-19 that we forget that there are other pathogens and sources of contamination on the farm that we can also pay a little bit of attention to.

Annie: Shakera, you're using these reusable bags. Frankie, you're using plastic bags. Jacob, what does your farm share use?

Jacob: We have a pretty cheap quality reusable bag. It's kind of a woven/poly bag and we can machine wash them. If we machine wash them, it cuts the number of uses down pretty substantially, but we don't expect them to last more than a season anyway.

Annie: And people return them?

Jacob: Yeah, I mean, hypothetically, yes.

[33:13]

Frankie: Y'all were talking about the stackability of the bins. I think that that is important and one of the things that we've ended up doing is just bagging the stuff, and then we put him in the [inaudible]. And then we stack up the [inaudible] with the bags in the back.

Shakera: I had a question about what are some other options, because right now we just use mostly jet oxide or peracetic acid like vinegar for cleaning, and I wasn't aware of Steramin, is there anything else out there?

Maggie: There are definitely a few options out there, and it kind of depends on if you are an organic operation. So, SaniDate is I think the most common one that is probably used on organic operations. Just make sure that it's food grade and that you follow the instructions so you're doing the proper [thing] as opposed to, just like glug-glug-ing it into your water. Be really precise about it. Jacob is in Vermont, and UVM AG engineering, they have an Instagram, they're always doing very cool things around produce safety and small farms so they're cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting tip-sheet is really helpful.

Annie: I have a question for the produce safety experts. Have things been changing in produce safety recommendations since Covid, or is it basically the same protocol since there's the norovirus and other

things that we need to be watching out for like this? The Covid attention takes away from other things, or it should all be addressing the same concerns?

Maggie: Billy, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

[35:17]

Billy: Well, a couple of things. The basics are still the basics. I think it's really just refocused everybody on hand washing and cleaning and sanitizing surfaces just in general. Like right now, there's no foodborne outbreaks in the United States, which I don't know when the last time that's happened. I think it's because people are so hyper-focused on the basics of if you're sick, don't come to work. Wash your hands and clean and sanitize things. I think maybe the biggest changes now [are that] people are kind of disinfecting more handles on coolers, which is an expensive step. I don't know if everybody really needs to go towards, but mostly things are kind of the same. We've added coronavirus to the list of things to worry about. There's a new concern.

Frankie: I'm really impressed that you guys are wearing masks on your farm. We've been kind of paranoid about stuff, but we cannot uphold that, it's just too dang hot, but we don't have too many employees. There's me, my business partner. And then either our romantic partners will come help us or we have one employee. It's pretty low, the amount of people that we come into contact with on the farm.

Cheryl: We don't wear masks all the time on the farm. We wear them while we're harvesting and washing and packing, we're not 24/7 on the farm with masks. If we're away from people doing tractor work or doing weeding or something, we're not wearing masks, because, like you said, it's hot. What about you Shakera?

[37:35]

Shakera: Yeah, it hasn't been as hot as usual and so for us mostly we just wear masks with harvesting, washing, prepping. It does get very hot.

Annie: The one thing that is sort of interesting about an additional thing that we've been thinking about is because we're ramping up and needing more help, it means that there are more people around. We have more volunteers around, but we've now had, you know, we've got 3 people bagging sometimes and we have to make sure that they're being 6 feet apart and all wearing masks. Better to air on the side of encouraging people to wear masks, and then we can break the rules as we think.

Cheryl: I think it just helps everyone feel like we're all paying attention and doing our best to keep transmission low.

Annie: It's stressful. I'll come home at the end of the day and just be like, "Oh, I can take my mask off, I can finally forget it. This is a moment of being I don't have to worry about what's gonna get me." When I come home it's like this release and I felt that earlier on, but I'm more accustomed to thing now and we're in New Orleans which was a major hot spot for awhile.

Cheryl: It was definitely pretty tense in the beginning. Everyone scrutinizing every single thing we're doing. We're already mid-season, as I'm sure you can both relate, being in Texas, it was just like, "Oh my God, what do we need to drastically change to keep our customers safe" It was just paralysis at every harvest, like, "Is this going to make people sick?" In those first few weeks, we just didn't know are all of our customers going to turn up sick? I think seeing that people have maintained their health, for the most part, as far as we know, has been a real confidence boost. We're pretty sure we're not spreading Covid through our systems.

Annie: But I think also being outside is statistically a lot safer. We are in an industry that feels like a pretty safe thing to be doing relative to other jobs.

Shakera: Thanks everyone, I'm going to take off and get back to some farm work.

Annie: Sure, we're going to take off. Bye everyone, thank you.

Outro: Thanks for listening to our Produce Safety Focus Group series. For visuals from the presentations, more information on this series, and other produce safety resources, visit youngfarmers.org/focusgroups. This podcast was edited by Hannah Biel and recorded in partnership with the National Farmers Union Foundation over the summer of 2020 as part of our FSOP produce safety programming.

[40:54]

Transcribed by Melanie Arthur, National Farmers Union